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**The South Atlantic Crisis of 1982:
Implications for Nuclear Crisis Management**

Lawrence Freedman

May 1989

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Implications for Nuclear Crisis Management**

Lawrence Freedman

May 1989

**Prepared for
The Carnegie Corporation**

**Project on
Avoiding Nuclear War:
Managing Conflict in the Nuclear Age**

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PREFACE

The Falklands War began on April 2, 1982, when Argentine forces occupied the Falkland Islands in pursuit of their long-standing claim to sovereignty. Britain immediately sent a task force to the South Atlantic to recover the islands, and by the middle of June it had achieved this objective. This Note examines the course and management of the conflict and assesses its potential relevance to nuclear crises. It addresses the variety of specific nuclear features that have been attributed to the conflict and also considers a more general set of concerns related to escalation.

The Note was prepared as part of the Avoiding Nuclear War project conducted jointly by The RAND Corporation and the RAND/UCLA Center for the Study of International Behavior. The project is sponsored by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The study presented in this Note draws in part on research the author is conducting for a book entitled *Signals of War*, to be published in 1990 by Faber and Faber (London).

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SUMMARY

The great symbolic importance of the Falklands Islands—or the Malvinas, as they are known in Argentina—for the Argentines was not appreciated by the British at the time the Falklands War first erupted in March 1982. The Argentines seized on a relatively minor incident as an opportunity to capture the islands, which were lightly defended by a detachment of Royal Marines. During April, Britain assembled and dispatched a naval task force, while the U.S. Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, engaged in an ultimately fruitless attempt to mediate the crisis. Diplomatic efforts continued throughout the month of May, while the military forces of Britain and Argentina engaged in sporadic, if sometimes dramatic, combat. Britain finally prevailed militarily after heavy fighting in mid-June.

A limited encounter such as this has relevance for a full-scale superpower crisis, in several dimensions. Britain's nuclear capability was generally considered irrelevant to the conduct of the war, but even if Argentina had been a nuclear power, as it might be one day, it is by no means clear that nuclear capabilities would have played a significant role. However, nuclear powers cannot escape their status, even when their nuclear capability has slight relevance to a particular conflict. Any risk of nuclear escalation is considered unacceptable, and a nuclear power can expect to be charged with running such a risk simply by virtue of being a nuclear power.

For navies, the risks connected with the carriage of nuclear weapons in a combat zone are important to keep in mind. Significant damage to a ship carrying nuclear weapons could turn a serious incident into a major crisis. Britain did not take nuclear weapons into the South Atlantic, but the risks of the loss of nuclear weapons in combat and nuclear contamination at sea still exercise a powerful hold on imaginations. This has important implications for those aspects of U.S. policy that stress the role of SLCMs in "out-of-area" conflicts.

Sensitivity to the nuclear issue created concerns in 1982 that the war would exacerbate the risks of nuclear proliferation in the South Atlantic. A future demonstration of nuclear capability would put Britain on notice that it should negotiate seriously over the Falklands and would warn Argentina's neighbors not to underestimate her in the wake of the setback there.

The decisionmaking processes of this crisis are relevant to any study of crisis management. The consequences of either success or failure (but especially the latter) could be enormous. The conflict therefore provides some insights into crisis decisionmaking in contemporary states.

The concept of escalation, which has played such a major role in strategic thought during the nuclear era, also was of great importance during the Falklands crisis. In the absence of relevant military experience, both sides were influenced—perhaps more than they were aware—by the ideas of contemporary strategic studies; in Britain, the influence of the concept of escalation was evident in both the deliberations of policymakers and the public debate.

However, even in the simplest military operations against a well-armed opponent some distance from home, unavoidable problems of imperfect intelligence and imperfect communications, plus the persistent failure of adversaries to do quite what they are expected to do, mean that the worst of decisions can be taken for the best of reasons, or at least that the notorious “fog of war” can be influential throughout. The degree to which this occurs in even a comparatively limited encounter serves as a warning of the potential impact of these factors in a major confrontation. Two examples from the Falklands conflict illustrate the point. The first is the Argentine decision to seize the islands. At a time when the British Foreign Office ministers were deciding *not* to send ships that had been exercising off Gibraltar to the South Atlantic because this would be too provocative, the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs was convinced that these ships *must* be on their way because of (British) press reports that they *could* be on their way. The Argentine action thus represented a deliberate act of escalation, but one taken in the mistaken belief that the British government had already taken its own steps toward escalation.

The second example is the sinking of the Argentine cruiser *Belgrano*, one of the war's most dramatic incidents. The decision to authorize attack, made in London, was based on outdated information that the *Belgrano* was closing on the British task force. In fact, the *Belgrano* had turned around and was steaming away.

Prescriptions for crisis management often assume the possibility of maintaining firm political control, even after military actions have begun. To the extent that crisis managers depend on gearing military operations to the demands of diplomacy, knowledge of the actual processes of crisis management can help warn of the difficulties of achieving and sustaining such control. Expectations of the development of modern crises have been shaped by notions of escalation and graduated response, in which everything moves forward in discrete

stages linked in some way to a negotiating process. This view understates the impact of operational factors on attempts to gear military actions solely to the progress of negotiations. The dynamics of crisis and war ensure that the expectations of gradualism are rarely fulfilled. This can lead to both mistakes, in terms of governments taking inappropriate measures of crisis management, and accusations of bad faith in attempts to reach a settlement. The more a conflict develops, the greater the danger of overinterpreting military moves as a series of diplomatic signals, since those moves are increasingly likely to be geared to operational imperatives. The concept of escalation has therefore become more influential in shaping attitudes toward crisis and war than its explanatory and predictive power warrants.

The unavoidable tension between political and military logic in the conduct of any limited war warns against any attempt to relate diplomatic action too closely with military action, simply because of the speed with which operational circumstances can change. If tactical decisions become too infused with political meaning, there is a risk that the outcomes of particular engagements, which can never be exactly foreseen, will be wrongly interpreted.

Control of the transition from crisis to war depends on military action being adjusted throughout to the requirements of diplomacy. From this case study, it can be seen that unless the practicalities of military power are understood, such power will not prove to be an adequate tool of diplomacy, but will create diplomatic imperatives of its own. The military logic will drive the political logic. Once invoked, military power transforms diplomacy, as compulsion takes over from compromise.

It is worth noting in this regard that restraint in the use of force is much more feasible for countries with significant local military superiority or at least substantial reserves and a range of options that can be sustained over time. The importance of the quality of logistical arrangements in this regard is frequently underappreciated.

In sum, events generally move faster than the capacity of decisionmakers to absorb them and assess their meaning. Information is inevitably imperfect and incomplete, and it is often contradictory. The assumptions with which decisionmakers fill the gaps may be hopelessly wrong, yet perfectly reasonable. Small-scale military encounters can have decisive political consequences; thus, political control over military operations is necessary but extraordinarily difficult. Military force is not a light and sensitive instrument. It is heavy and unwieldy and can produce unexpected results.

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I. BACKGROUND

Until March 1982, the question of the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands and its dependencies was a relatively low-priority issue in Britain, except in the minds of a small but well-placed and determined lobby, while it had extremely high priority in Argentina.¹ Irritation over apparent British intransigence had been building up over a number of years in Argentina and was likely to come to a head in 1982 (the 150th anniversary of the British reacquisition of the territory was to be observed in January 1983). This situation had been clearly signaled in both diplomatic pronouncements and informal leaks in newspapers. The British Foreign Office was aware of the growing frustration in Buenos Aires but did not consider the dispute to be approaching the danger point. Even as relations began to deteriorate in early 1982, it was assumed that any direct action by Argentina would be gradual rather than decisive, putting pressure on Britain rather than presenting it with a *fait accompli*. This assumption was not unreasonable and for much of the period may have been shared in Buenos Aires. However, the lack of attention in London to the implications of Argentina's impatience and the lack of understanding of Argentine perceptions made it difficult for Britain to appreciate the dynamics of the crisis once it picked up in earnest during March 1982.

The events in March were triggered by a group of scrap-metal merchants landing on the dependency of South Georgia without following formal procedures. Argentina resisted British attempts to ensure that the scrap-metal merchants were all removed, thus raising the temperature of the brewing crisis. The Argentine government, perhaps fearing that Britain was using this incident as a pretext to reinforce its sovereignty over the Falkland Islands, seized the opportunity to take the Islands—known in Argentina as Las Malvinas—which they accomplished with only limited opposition from a small detachment of Royal Marines. The next month was spent in diplomatic activity to resolve the crisis, with the U.S. Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, attempting to mediate. Britain gradually stepped up the military pressure. A large task force was assembled with extraordinary speed and sent to the South Atlantic, using Ascension Island as a forward base. On April 25, the South Georgia dependency was retaken. On April 29, Secretary of State Haig reported that his mission had failed to resolve the crisis, blamed Argentina for the impasse, and announced an American tilt in favor of Britain.

¹For background, see Lawrence Freedman, *Britain and the Falklands War*, London: Blackwells, 1988.

The next stage of the dispute began on May 1, when the British began air raids on the Stanley airfield, and the Argentines responded with attacks on the task force. The military results of these engagements were limited. The most substantial military engagement took place the next day, when a British nuclear-powered submarine sank the Argentine cruiser *Belgrano*, with considerable loss of life. This was followed two days later by the sinking of the British destroyer HMS *Sheffield*.

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis continued at the United Nations, as the Secretary-General engaged in regular discussions with the British and Argentine Ambassadors. On May 17, Britain made a final offer, which Argentina rejected. By May 20, the mediation was clearly over.

The next day, the British landed at Port San Carlos and established a bridgehead in the face of substantial air attacks. A week later, the settlements of Darwin and Goose Green were captured after some fierce fighting. British forces were then moved slowly across the East Falklands to the capital at Stanley. In a series of engagements, they overran Argentine defenses on the periphery of Stanley. Finally, the Argentine garrisons on both East and West Falklands surrendered on June 14.

II. THE FALKLANDS AND THE STUDY OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The Falklands conflict was a war limited in time, space, and objectives. About 1,000 servicemen from both sides lost their lives, and about a third of these perished in one single engagement, the sinking of the *Belgrano*. The conflict was unique in that it was between two countries that both had close connections to the United States and reasonably well-equipped forces, and notable because of its prominent naval dimension. It was also unusual in that the clash of arms only lasted a few months and there was a relatively decisive result.

In its origins, course, and outcome, the Falklands War bears little resemblance to the familiar scenarios for the outbreak of World War III. Neither country involved faced a mortal threat, and except for attempts at mediation and some transfers of equipment, other countries kept clear of the fighting. There were inherent logistical problems facing any attempt to sustain the conflict by putting in extra reserves because of the distances involved for both sides, but especially for the British, and there were the standard problems with supply lines to islands.

The more obvious "lessons" of the conflict (in the sense of stimulants to thought rather than rules to be applied) concern the special requirements of limited conflicts in a highly attentive political environment, both domestic and international. Conflicts of this type do not have many battles or even skirmishes. Long periods of inactivity are followed by bursts of intensive activity. Even the most limited encounter between the opposing forces can have important political consequences.¹ Failure might weaken the bargaining position of the government vis-a-vis its opponent, but apparently provocative action can lead to diplomatic isolation.

¹A good example of this was the operation to retake the dependency of South Georgia. The operation was almost a disaster. An advance party was helicoptered onto a glacier, on which it got stuck. Two helicopters crashed trying to rescue it, but a third succeeded. These mishaps were kept secret, partly so that Argentina would be unaware of the loss of these assets. On April 25, a submarine was observed reinforcing the garrison. The operation was immediately brought forward. The Argentine submarine *Santa Fe* was severely damaged by missiles and depth charges from helicopters and was forced to ditch on land. Marines landed and surprised the garrison, which surrendered without much resistance, providing the desired impression of effortless British victory. If this first operation had ended as a fiasco, it could have finished the whole campaign, leaving a completely different impression from the one eventually left.

These unique characteristics create particular problems with command and control. Arrangements for small-scale engagements would normally be delegated to field commanders, following standard operating procedures, but because these limited engagements can have major strategic implications, there is a case for high-level political input. That, in turn, can lead to accusations of micromanagement. Decisions by either local commanders or senior politicians inevitably have to be made on the basis of imperfect information, a problem that the local commanders may appreciate more than the politicians, especially when the intelligence involved is largely tactical. Can a limited encounter such as this have relevance for a full-scale superpower crisis? I would argue that it can, in three senses. First, superpowers are distinguished by the unlimited destructive power at their disposal. One of the participants in the Falklands conflict had access to such power, and while it was truly inconceivable that Britain's nuclear capability would be brought into play, the existence of that capability cast a small shadow over the proceedings. This will be explored at some length later in this Note, largely to demonstrate the fact that a nuclear power can never quite relieve itself of that status even in circumstances when it is in everyone's interests for it to do so.

Second, and following on from the first point, even the most limited military engagement involving a great power attracts much public attention and generates controversy because of its very rarity. The presumption of imminent escalation is never far away.

Third, the decisionmaking processes involved are relevant to any study of crisis management. While something less than the future of civilization as we know it was at stake in the Falklands, it was clear to both countries that the crisis was a "threshold event" and that the consequences of either success or failure (but especially the latter) could be enormous. The stakes were high enough to dominate government business for almost three months. The conflict therefore provides some insight into crisis decisionmaking in contemporary states. Inevitably, there are profound variations in political institutions and culture which limit the conclusions that might be drawn for other countries. For example, Britain's highly centralized decisionmaking, backed by a professional civil service and accountable to Parliament, contrasts with the more open and decentralized U.S. system. Also, the British system was not put to a severe test during the campaign: Because the government never appeared to be losing the military and diplomatic initiative, except on occasion and to a limited extent, the political system was never put to a severe test. The government was backed in the essentials of its conduct of the war by the main opposition

parties and by public opinion. The conduct of the war did not trigger an economic crisis or a diplomatic crisis. Allies more or less stayed loyal.

There are, however, characteristics of British policymaking during the war which would be shared by the other major powers. Most of the political leaders involved had had little relevant experience of war. This means that they lacked a base of knowledge with which to assess and challenge military advice. In a way, this was as true for the military junta in Argentina as it was for the British government, since the major military engagements involving the Argentine forces had been with local guerrillas, and the close involvement of the Argentine military in domestic politics had left little time for refinement of the traditional arts of strategy and command.

In the absence of relevant experience, both sides were influenced—perhaps more than they were aware—by some of the ideas of contemporary strategic studies. In Argentina, considerable interest had been expressed in the role of military action in getting issues high on to the political agenda (as Anwar Sadat was believed to have done during the October 1973 War); in Britain, the influence of the concept of escalation was evident in both the deliberations of policymakers and the public debate.

The modest value of the concept of escalation as a tool for policymakers was soon demonstrated in practice, which brings us to the third of the possible “lessons.” It is striking that even in the apparently most limited and contained of crises, matters soon become very complicated. In even the simplest military operations against a well-armed opponent some distance from home, unavoidable problems of imperfect intelligence and imperfect communications, plus the persistent failure of adversaries to do quite what they are expected to do, mean that the worst of decisions can be taken for the best of reasons, or at least that the notorious “fog of war” can be influential throughout. The degree to which this occurs in even a comparatively limited encounter serves as a warning of the potential impact of these factors in a major confrontation, where many separate encounters will be happening at once.

For this reason, the concept of escalation is examined closely in this Note. In the study of crisis management, it is very prominent, often being represented in terms of the consequences of failure of crisis management, but also because it is the process to be exploited in securing national interests during a crisis while preventing matters from getting out of hand. Prescriptions for crisis management often assume the possibility of maintaining firm political control, even after military actions have begun. To the extent that crisis managers depend on gearing military operations to the demands of diplomacy, knowledge of the actual processes of crisis management can help warn of the difficulties of achieving and sustaining such control.

The concept of escalation was introduced in the late 1950s to describe the tragic process by which a limited war might turn into a total war. It was soon appropriated by those who believed that the process by which a conflict grew in scope and intensity could be controlled and that success in manipulating this process could ensure a favorable outcome. This approach was closely linked to the search for ways of conducting a crisis or even a limited war with the Soviet Union without bringing about a nuclear holocaust and was encouraged by the Cuban missile crisis.

It also influenced U.S. practice during the Vietnam War, especially as the Johnson Administration sought to assess the alternative forms of pressure that might be brought to bear against Hanoi during 1964-65. "Escalation" became a familiar term in explanations of what went wrong in U.S. policies, and it began to regain its negative connotations. However, the legacy of this period remains the concept of escalation as a process that can be either deliberate and controlled or inadvertent and uncontrolled.²

By and large, the key assumption behind crisis management is that if the crisis cannot be managed, the result will be war, or if fighting has already started, it will get much worse. The essential distinction between a managed crisis and an unmanaged crisis is that of controlled vs. uncontrolled escalation. The presumption in much of the literature on crisis management is that crises are a recognized feature of international affairs, and that they require the adoption of special procedures developed over time and refined with practice. However, when standard crises are discussed, they cease to be crises at all. Life has become a bit busier, but there is no sense of impending disaster.

A real crisis is one which nobody can be sure is going to be managed. This occurs when the problem has not appeared in an expected form and according to a recognized type, and the response therefore has to be improvised. This should lead one to question whether standard procedures can be devised to manage crises; more important is a sensitivity to the variables, of which those associated with domestic politics might be said to be the most absent from academic discussions of the subject.

Expectations of the development of modern crises have been shaped by notions of escalation and graduated response, in which everything moves forward in discrete stages linked in some way to a negotiating process. This view understates the impact of operational factors on attempts to gear military action solely to the progress of negotiations. It also

²For a discussion of the concept of escalation, see Lawrence Freedman, "On the Tiger's Back: The Development of the Concept of Escalation," in Roman Kolkowicz (ed.), *The Logic of Nuclear Terror*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1987.

means that those entering into a conflict may have wholly erroneous expectations about its future development. The dynamics of crisis and war ensure that the expectations of gradualism are rarely fulfilled. This can lead to both mistakes, in terms of governments taking inappropriate measures of crisis management, and accusations of bad faith in attempts to reach a settlement.

Because it is now so often assumed that military moves in the early stages of a conflict are intended to carry a political message rather than simply reflect a prudent measure of preparedness, more can be read into these moves than is warranted. The more a conflict develops, the greater the danger of overinterpreting military moves as a series of diplomatic signals, since those moves are increasingly likely to be geared to operational imperatives. The concept of escalation has therefore become more influential in shaping attitudes toward crisis and war than its explanatory and predictive power warrants. This argument will be explored in Section IV of this Note.

Section III examines the particular relevance of the Falklands conflict for *nuclear* crisis management. Even a conflict as limited as this did acquire a marginal nuclear dimension, which is examined in detail by illustrating some of the precautions that any nuclear power might need to take when embarking on a nonnuclear campaign to ensure that nuclear weapons do not become implicated in any way. Slight tendencies toward nuclear escalation are evident even in encounters where there is absolutely no doubt that both governments would concede defeat rather than countenance such escalation.

III. NUCLEAR DIMENSIONS

THE USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Most of the credibility problems with nuclear strategy are associated with the expectation of retaliation should nuclear weapons be used against another nuclear power. It could therefore be argued that nuclear threats against nonnuclear powers would have added credibility. While this might be true if a nonnuclear power was foolish enough to invade a nuclear power, when the stakes are not so high, nuclear use still lacks credibility. Evan Luard has used the example of the Falklands War to support his thesis of the irrelevance of nuclear capabilities in most international disputes, even when the confrontation is between a nuclear and a nonnuclear power:

The costs involved in their use, in lives lost and reputations foregone, would have far outweighed any gains likely to be won by using them. Even a *threat* to use them would have had heavy political costs; and would have weakened rather than strengthened the power employing it when the bluff was exposed. The non-use of nuclear weapons—what Raymond Aron once described as the “nuclear taboo”—has become part of the normative framework of international relations.¹

This norm has been given some legal standing in the form of Negative Security Assurances. Britain has committed itself *not* to attack nonnuclear states through such an Assurance made at the United Nations Special Session on Disarmament in 1978. There, the head of the U.K. delegation made the following statement:

I accordingly give the following assurances on behalf of my Government to non-nuclear weapon States which are parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty or other internationally binding commitments not to manufacture or acquire nuclear explosive devices: Britain undertakes not to use nuclear weapons against such states except in the case of an attack on the United Kingdom, its dependent territories, its armed forces or its allies by such a state in association or in alliance with a nuclear weapons State.²

¹Evan Luard, *The Blunted Sword: The Erosion of Military Power in Modern World Politics*, London: Tauris & Co., 1988, p. 27.

²*The United Nations Special Session on Disarmament, Annex Q, Cmnd 7267*, London: HMSO, 1978.

Of course, Argentina has ratified neither the Non-Proliferation Treaty nor the Treaty of Tlateloco, which might have served as an alternative. In this sense, the undertaking might not have been deemed to apply to Argentina. However, it reinforces the view that nuclear use would have seemed excessive and even preposterous in the circumstances of the Falklands War. Britain's nuclear capability is thus generally considered irrelevant to the conduct of the war. Even if Argentina had been a nuclear power, as it might be one day, it is by no means clear that nuclear capabilities would have played a significant role. At most, the British nuclear capability would have provided some reassurance that nuclear weapons would not have been used against British forces. But Argentina would have had the most to lose from nuclear engagements so close to its shores: It would not have been able to retaliate against Britain itself unless it also developed a submarine-launched missile system, and it would not wish the islands at the center of the dispute to become irradiated as a result of a nuclear detonation.

Nevertheless, it has been reported that the nuclear option was raised in internal studies, only to be dismissed, as the British government began to organize its response to the Argentine invasion of the Islands on April 2, 1982. A paper was prepared for ministers setting out the military options available to the government. The question of how far Britain should be prepared to go in a confrontation with Argentina was raised. It was suggested that the nuclear option should at least be addressed. It was concluded that Polaris submarine-launched missiles provided the only reliable nuclear option,³ that this would require removal of an SSBN from NATO, and that there was little chance of Britain exercising such an option. One source is quoted as saying:

Certainly the nuclear option was one of the options studied on 2 April . . . part of the work done that day involved examining the possibility of retargeting Polaris against Argentina.⁴

This was never taken seriously as a realistic possibility, and thereafter no staff work was devoted to the matter. Lord Lewin, who was Chief of the Defence Staff at the time, has stated that:

³Britain's other main nuclear delivery vehicle at the time, the Vulcan bomber, was used in raids on Port Stanley, although of course it carried only conventional weapons.

⁴*New Statesman*, August 31, 1984.

there was never any thought whatever of giving advice to the War Cabinet that nuclear weapons should be used. It never entered our remotest thoughts.

Admiral Sir Henry Leach, then the First Sea Lord, insisted that:

We did not contemplate a nuclear attack and did not make any preparatory moves for such action. . . . No variation whatever was applied to the normal patrols of the Polaris submarines.⁵

These statements were made in response to allegations that first appeared in the *New Statesman* (the repository of many such allegations) in August 1984. It was alleged that an SSBN went as far South as Ascension Island in order to threaten or launch a demonstrative nuclear attack against Cordoba in Northern Argentina. This was to be a response to the sinking of one of the capital ships—a carrier or a troopship such as the HMS *Canberra*. The decision to send the submarine was said to have been taken in the aftermath of the sinking of the HMS *Sheffield*, as ministers confronted the possibility that some more well-placed Exocets could spell defeat for the task force. The source was a senior conservative backbench MP, in conversation with Labour MP Tam Dalyell (who has been engaged in an intensive search for all evidence of scandal in the government's conduct of the Falkland Islands War). The *New Statesman* claimed that the details of the deployment "were given in a series of highly classified telegrams sent to the British Embassy in Washington."⁶

This allegation was comprehensively denied. However, it has been revived recently by Paul Rogers of Bradford University, who has claimed that the submarine was located "some hundreds of miles southwest of Ascension Island" and that there were insufficient hunter-killers to meet the task force's requirements in the South Atlantic because two were held back to protect a Polaris SSBN.⁷ This all seems unlikely. It is not normal practice for British Polaris submarines to have any escorts; it would have taken many days for an SSBN to reach the Ascension Island area from its normal patrol areas; the SSBN would not have been able to stay long before it would have been obliged to return to the United Kingdom if

⁵Rodney Cowton, "Nuclear Option in Falklands Denied," *The Times*, August 24, 1984.

⁶Duncan Campbell and John Rentoul, "All Out War," *New Statesman*, August 24, 1984.

⁷The Belgrano Enquiry, *The Unnecessary War*, London: Spokesman Books, 1988.

it were not to have exceeded its normal patrol time; the Soviet Union would have been well out of range, so there would have been a direct contradiction of official policy on the deterrent; the deployment would also have contradicted statements made by Admiral Leach and others at the time of the specific allegations to the effect that there were no alterations to the standard patrol pattern. Furthermore, of course, it remains unclear what possible strategic advantage the United Kingdom could have gained at any point in the conflict from the use of nuclear weapons.

There is one footnote to this issue. During the conflict, public opinion was polled regularly. It is worth noting as a general point that a substantial portion of the public opinion tended toward a more hawkish stance than that adopted by the government. This came out most clearly during April, when a variety of options were still being canvassed but the implications of pursuing them had not been fully aired. A poll undertaken by Market and Opinion Research International (MORI) on April 14 revealed that some 28 percent of the respondents were prepared to bomb Argentine air and naval bases, and 21 percent were willing to contemplate invading the Argentine mainland. Astonishingly, 5 percent were ready to use nuclear weapons against Argentina. Opposed to such a step were 93 percent, with 2 percent finding it difficult to make up their minds.⁸

THE CARRIAGE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Not long after the conflict was over, there were a number of reports that the task force had carried nuclear weapons into the South Atlantic, not with the intention of using them but because they were part of the normal complement of weapons and had not been removed. The allegations were based on reports that a deep-diving vessel had been sent to recover equipment from the sunken wreck of the HMS *Coventry*, a Type 42 destroyer. Earlier reports had spoken of attempts to find nuclear weapons in the wreck of the HMS

⁸One of those responsible for collecting and interpreting this information attended a dinner party and expressed his horror that 1 in 20 Britons could take such a position. He was fixed with a frosty glare from an upper-class lady, who informed the assembled company that if necessary, "Rio must be razed to the ground." Whether or not the lady was aware that Rio was not in Argentina, her point still held, in that she saw no obvious limits to British action. The poll was conducted on April 14, 1982, and was based on interviews with 1,018 adults aged 18 and over in 53 constituency sampling points across Great Britain. The results were published in *The Economist*, April 16, 1988. In a book containing his posthumously published letters, Lieut. David Tinker (HMS *Glamorgan*) quotes a colleague who suggested in early April, "Drop a big white job (Polaris) on them." Tinker adds, "Thank goodness he's not in command." (David Tinker, *A Message from the Falklands*, London: Junction Books, 1982, p.158.)

Sheffield, another Type 42 destroyer.⁹ However, it is now believed that the deep-diving vessel was attempting to recover top-secret cryptographic equipment and codebooks. At any rate, Type 42 destroyers do not normally carry nuclear weapons.¹⁰

George Quester has claimed that British conduct during the war created "dangerous nuclear precedents," but this was largely on the basis of rumors that British ships in the combat zone had nuclear weapons on board as well as on the use of nuclear-propelled submarines. Given the anxiety over the anti-submarine problem faced by Britain, Quester asks whether there would have been a temptation to have available to the Fleet the full range of anti-submarine capabilities and even to use nuclear depth charges if the Argentine submarines had performed better than they did. He notes that this might have been rationalized on the basis that there would have been no collateral damage to civilians and no radioactive fallout.¹¹ However, all this is wholly speculative, as the British government showed no inclination to succumb to such temptations.

Normally, British carriers (in this case, the HMS *Invincible* and the HMS *Hermes*) and some frigates carry nuclear depth charges for anti-submarine warfare purposes. There seems to be little doubt that some ships, especially those that came straight from exercises off Gibraltar, were carrying nuclear weapons. It has been reported that three-quarters of the total naval stockpile set off toward the South Atlantic—but also that ministers were horrified when this was discovered and ordered a Royal Fleet Auxiliary to collect them at Ascension Island. It has also been suggested that after this discovery, there was great reluctance to let nuclear weapons go to sea again for some time.¹²

Despite the fact that Britain *did not* take nuclear weapons into the South Atlantic, the allegations that it did and that some nuclear weapons were lost when ships were sunk (and are thus now possibly polluting the South Atlantic) still exercises a powerful hold on some imaginations. Officials in the Soviet embassy in Buenos Aires have been reported to be spreading the charge of nuclear contamination, citing as evidence the appearance of a

⁹*New York Times*, July 1, 1988. Some dummy nuclear weapons, which are used for training purposes, may have been seen and mistaken for the real thing. Tinker reported on June 5, 1982: "One of our jobs out here is to transfer stores around and between ships and yesterday I walked into the hangar and found a nuclear bomb there. . . . Of course, it turned out to be a drill round, full of concrete, that *Fort Austin*, now eventually going home, was taking back to England." (Tinker, op. cit., p.198.)

¹⁰Duncan Campbell, "Too Few Bombs to Go Round," *New Statesman*, November 29, 1985.

¹¹George Quester, "The Nuclear Implications of the South Atlantic War," in R. B. Byers (ed.), *The Denuclearization of the Oceans*, London: Croom Helm, 1986.

¹²Duncan Campbell, "Too Few Bombs to Go Round," *New Statesman*, op. cit.

number of dead penguins, and warning that "the Argentines have their own Chernobyl in the Atlantic."¹³

On a slightly different basis, there have also been regular accusations that Britain is using the base that has now been established on the Falkland Islands to store nuclear weapons (possibly on behalf of NATO). This was raised, for example, in April 1987 at the tenth General Conference in Montevideo of OPANAL (Organismo para la Proscripcion de las Arms Nucleares en la America Latina), the agency set up to monitor the Treaty of Tlateloco. Some senior Argentine officials have argued that Argentina could not ratify the treaty until Britain provided proof that no nuclear weapons were stored on the Islands. Brazilians have also cited the possibility of nuclear weapons on British and Latin American bases as a justification for the campaign to turn the South Atlantic into a zone of peace "shielded," to quote President Sarney in a speech to the UN General Assembly in September 1985, "from the arms race (and) the presence of nuclear arms."¹⁴ These speculations have been raised despite a denial from Britain that there was any intention of building a nuclear base in the Falklands. The British Ambassador to Uruguay, Charles Wallace, stated in November 1983 that he could

category assert that we will not set up any such base, because Britain was one of the first countries to sign the Tlateloco Treaty.¹⁵

The final link between British nuclear capability and the South Atlantic is the less deniable presence of nuclear-powered submarines during the conflict and afterwards. Britain's nuclear-powered submarines were seen to exercise a critical influence on the course of the conflict (especially, but not solely, with the sinking of the Argentine cruiser *Belgrano* by the HMS *Conqueror*). This was not in itself a violation of the Treaty of Tlateloco,¹⁶ a point acknowledged by Argentina, although the issue was still raised in the context of the Treaty at the Eighth Conference of OPANAL, which met in Kingston in May 1983. The conference expressed its "concern over the fact that nuclear-propelled submarines had been used in war-like actions in areas falling within the geographical zone,"

¹³*Arms Control Reporter*, June 23, 1986.

¹⁴*Arms Control Reporter*, September 23, 1985; June 29, 1984; April 28-30, 1987.

¹⁵*Arms Control Reporter*, November 22, 1983.

¹⁶At the time of the conflict, the British Ambassador to the United Nations, Sir Anthony Parsons, wrote to the President of the General Assembly that the Treaty excludes "an instrument that may be used for the transport or propulsion of the device . . . if it is separable from the device and not an indivisible part thereof." (Letter to President of the General Assembly A/S-12/29, cited in *Arms Control Reporter*, June 15, 1982.)

as defined by the Treaty. The conference also called on all signatories "to refrain from engaging in activities which may endanger the military nuclear-free status of Latin America."¹⁷ Brazil, however, has indicated more recently that it does not see nuclear-powered submarines (for which it has its own plans) as being incompatible with its notions of turning the South Atlantic into a "Zone of Peace."

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

The sensitivity to the nuclear issue created concerns in 1982 that the war would exacerbate the risks of nuclear proliferation in the South Atlantic. Argentina has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, described as a plan to "disarm the disarmed," and has signed but not ratified the Treaty of Tlateloco. It has also reserved for itself the right to experiment with peaceful nuclear explosions.

By 1982, Argentina already had a reasonably well-developed nuclear program. Experimental reactors had been built since 1958. A 370-megawatt reactor had been operating since 1974. Two 600-megawatt reactors were under construction; feasibility studies had begun on a third, and the plan was for two more to be put in operation by 1997. Fuel components for these plants were being built on an industrial scale, using Argentine technology. A heavy water plant and a plutonium reprocessing plant were being installed. The Argentine Atomic Energy Commission (CNEA) had managed to maintain a steady budget and leadership despite the country's economic and political problems.¹⁸

There were some early indications that the conflict had given Argentina's nuclear program an additional spurt. During 1983, for example, Rear Admiral Castro Madero, then President of the CNEA,¹⁹ said that the country would be "self-sufficient in nuclear matters by the year 2000" and that it had acquired the capability to produce enriched uranium, thereby completing the fuel cycle.²⁰ A uranium enrichment plant would be in operation by the end of 1985. However, he also said that these activities were geared to the "welfare and

¹⁷*Arms Control Reporter*, May 16-19, 1983. For an Argentine statement that the presence of U.K. nuclear submarines violates a "moral" rather than a "legal" principle, see *Arms Control Reporter*, February 28, 1983.

¹⁸"Special Supplement on Latin American Nuclear Technology," *International Herald Tribune*, October 30, 1982.

¹⁹Admiral Madero's son, Carlos, was an officer on board the *Belgrano* when it was sunk. He survived. (*Nucleonics Week*, 13 May 1982.)

²⁰*International Herald Tribune*, November 21, 1983; *Economist*, November 26, 1983.

health" of the people, and not to military purposes. There were reports throughout the year—ostensibly from U.S. intelligence sources—to the effect that Argentina might attempt to test a nuclear device soon and that it could have a small arsenal by the mid-1980s. It was suggested that the junta might wish to attempt to regain its popularity by such a test before the October elections. A demonstration of nuclear capability would put Britain on notice that it should negotiate seriously over the Falklands and would warn Argentina's neighbors not to underestimate Argentina in the wake of the setback in the Falklands.²¹

There were also powerful arguments against moving to a military capability: concern over a consequential arms race involving Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, and Mexico; the impact of this on Argentine diplomacy when it needed allies more than ever; the undermining of attempts to peacefully resolve territorial disputes and to institute peaceful change in Brazil and Chile; and the diversion of resources.²²

When President Raul Alfonsin took power in December 1983, Argentina's position changed. He reduced the CNEA's budget, reaffirmed Argentina's peaceful nuclear intentions, and ruled out the possibility of a peaceful nuclear explosion. Over the past few years, the program has slowed down, and this has affected work on heavy water, reprocessing, and uranium enrichment. The main impact of the Falklands War and the failure to negotiate a settlement of the dispute in the years since 1982 has been to provide an occasional pretext for continuing a policy which was in place well before 1982 of noncooperation with regional and international nonproliferation measures.²³

At one point, it appeared that one direct consequence of the war might be the development of an Argentine nuclear submarine program. This idea was actively canvassed in Argentina in the aftermath of the conflict, and submarine construction may have begun not long after the war. It has been reported that the body of a submarine has been constructed in a shipyard on the River Plate, while the nuclear reactor is being built at Pilcaniyeu in Patagonia, where there is a uranium-enrichment facility. If completed, it would be fitted with the 500-mile-range Bigua missile. When Alfonsin became President, he allowed development work to continue, but the project proved to be extremely expensive and resources were cut.²⁴

²¹ *The Times* (London), May 9, 1983; *International Herald Tribune*, September 19, 1983; Daniel Poneman, "Nuclear Proliferation Prospects for Argentina," *Orbis*, Vol. 27, No. 4, Winter 1984.

²² Iglesias Rouco, *La Prensa*, September 20, 1983 (cited in *Arms Control Reporter*, November 22, 1983).

²³ *International Herald Tribune*, December 9, 1983.

²⁴ Maria Laura Avignolo, "Alfonsin Blocks Navy Hope of a Nuclear Sub," *Sunday Times*, August 21, 1988; see also *Arms Control Reporter*, December 21, 1982; April 15, 1983; August 7, 1985; September 26, 1986.

The Brazilian proposal for a South Atlantic Zone of Peace and Cooperation, noted above, has been described as a follow-on to the Treaty of Tlateloco, with the stimulus of the Falklands conflict. A resolution was passed at the 41st General Assembly calling for "the nonintroduction of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction" in the region. The resolution was co-sponsored by Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and eleven African states. It was opposed by the United States on the grounds that it "specifically excluded the littoral and hinterland states of the South Atlantic region from the zone" and implied that "restrictions should be placed on naval access to, and activity in, the South Atlantic." As yet, the "specifics of the South Atlantic Proposal have not . . . been developed fully."²⁵

Having reviewed the various claims with regard to British nuclear conduct during the Falklands War and the likely Argentine response, we must conclude that the nuclear dimension was minimal, consisting only of the use of nuclear-propelled submarines. However, what is perhaps significant is not that these claims lacked substance, but that they were made at all and have continued to surface despite a lack of evidence to sustain them. This indicates that nuclear powers cannot escape their status, even when the nuclear issue has slight relevance to a particular conflict. If a nuclear power is involved in a military confrontation, then a nuclear dimension is acquired immediately. For navies, the risks connected with the carriage of nuclear weapons into whatever combat zone they happen to be entering, even when there is no expectation of a clash with another nuclear power, are important to keep in mind. Significant damage to a ship carrying nuclear weapons could turn a serious incident into a major crisis with considerable political repercussions. This is relevant to those aspects of U.S. naval policy that stress the role of SLCMs in "out of area" conflicts.

It might be argued that the United States has been involved in a number of crises without the same attention being given to the fact that it is a nuclear power. One reason for this may be that the United States has much more conventional capability at its disposal than Britain. Whatever credibility the various concerns about British nuclear capability had was founded in anxiety that the war was going to be a very close call and that Britain might find itself in an embarrassing and dangerous situation, perhaps as the result of the loss of a carrier or troopship. In these circumstances, an attempt could have been made to escalate in order to regain the strategic initiative, and the obvious instrument of escalation would be nuclear weapons.

²⁵John Redick, *Nuclear Restraint in Latin America: Argentina and Brazil*, Occasional Paper One, University of Southampton: Centre for Policy Studies, 1988, p. 3.

It is my belief that the "nuclear taboo" is sufficiently strong to fend off such pressures and that there was never any risk that Britain would move in that direction. The sensitivity of nuclear issues is such that they will be raised, both domestically and externally, even when in practical terms there seems little reason to do so. What is *believed* to be the case with regard to nuclear risks is more likely to be important than what *is* the case. Any risk of nuclear escalation is considered unacceptable, and a nuclear power can expect to be charged with running such a risk, almost simply by virtue of being a nuclear power.

IV. ESCALATION, DIPLOMACY, AND OPERATIONS

The importance of popular, and even elite, attitudes in shaping crisis behavior is also apparent in the approach to escalation in general. In low-intensity conflicts, it is assumed that any escalation will be deliberate and controlled. This creates certain expectations. The first is that conflicts will develop in a gradual and incremental fashion, and the second is that each change will reflect a considered political judgment geared to clear political objectives. The influence of these ideas is illustrated in both the crisis that led to the Falklands War itself and in the later management of the war. We will examine these aspects by looking at two of the critical events of 1982: the March crisis which concluded with the Argentine decision to invade, and the sinking of the *Belgrano* in early May.

It is important to make two points with regard to the policymaking process and escalation. It is often stated that one way of keeping limited conflicts limited is to set limited objectives. This reflects the view that there is naturally some proportionality between ends and means. Unfortunately, the matter is not that simple. Certainly, in the early stages of a conflict, governments will be aware that some objectives cannot be met with the available means or that, if they can be, those means will be inappropriate and their use will create more problems than they will solve.

However, once a government has committed itself to certain objectives, even if they are quite limited, it has a stake in achieving these objectives beyond their intrinsic worth. In part, this a matter of international prestige and reputation. There are obvious dangers in allowing the demonstration of "resolve" to become an overriding objective, but most governments are keenly aware that their international image depends on their ability to handle major crises and that visibly scaling down—or dramatically failing to achieve—the objectives can damage this image, perhaps to a greater degree than success would bolster it. Even more serious, the government's position at home would be jeopardized by failure. The Conservative government in Britain was not popular in early 1982, and there was a widespread belief that the Prime Minister could well be forced to resign if the task force failed. The successful prosecution of the war saw a major surge in the government's popularity.¹ In Argentina, the junta was obliged to leave office following its defeat, joining

¹It remains a matter of some debate as to whether the "Falklands factor" was a major determinant of the sweeping Conservative victory in the general election of May 1983. For a powerful argument to the contrary, see David Sanders et al., "Government Popularity and the Falklands War: A Reassessment," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 17, 1987, pp. 281-313.

a distinguished line of dictatorships (Portugal, Greece) that have fallen in the aftermath of military failure.

Although it is often assumed that in modern welfare states there is no appetite for the defense of interests through the application of armed force, the evidence from this conflict is that public opinion can be highly supportive. Thus, although as much as a quarter of the British electorate expressed anxiety with regard to the human and material costs of the conflict and opposed provocation, an equal number wanted the government to take tougher action. Furthermore, as the conflict developed, there was growing readiness to accept a loss of life to remove Argentina from the Islands. When British sailors and soldiers died, this was attributed by the majority of the British public to Argentine intransigence, which, along with the original aggression, it was felt ought not to be rewarded.² In this way, the conflict created its own stake in the outcome, over and above the original interest. Because there was no influential body of opinion challenging the government's stance, and no major disaster in the conduct of the campaign prompted second thoughts, one has to be careful in making too much of this. Nonetheless, both governments were very aware of public opinion as a factor driving them on as much as holding them back.

A commitment to even limited objectives also creates problems in attempts to obtain a negotiated settlement. Both governments stressed the strength of popular feeling during the early stages of the Haig mediation so that he could realize the limits to their room for maneuver.³ In constructing possible compromises, it was difficult to prepare public opinion for any climb down. Insisting to a domestic audience that no serious concessions were being made helped increase the other side's suspicions that this was indeed the case.

THE MARCH CRISIS

British policy toward the Falkland Islands prior to March 1982 was shaped by tension between the logic of the geopolitical situation, which favored Argentina, and a series of past commitments with regard to self-determination, backed by an effective Falklands Islands lobby and supported by Parliament, which favored the Islanders. As the two positions became polarized, the government could only hope that in the long term, common sense

²For a discussion of opinion-poll evidence in Britain, see Freedman, *Britain and the Falklands War*, Chap. 8.

³See Alexander Haig, *Caveat*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1984. Mrs. Thatcher's method was to point out pictures of Nelson and Wellington to Haig as she took him around 10 Downing Street; President Galtieri's method was to expose him to mass demonstrations.

would prevail and the two sides could be reconciled. However, reconciliation was only likely if Britain put pressure on the Islanders to negotiate. The moment never seemed appropriate for such pressure. Despite the lack of political will in London to solve the dispute once and for all in some deal with Buenos Aires, there was no inclination to accept full responsibility for the long-term security and prosperity of the Islands.

In June 1981, in the course of a Defence Review, Britain decided to scrap the ice-patrol ship *HMS Endurance*—the sole regular British naval presence in the South Atlantic—which had taken on a symbolic importance far beyond its military capabilities. The Foreign Office warned, correctly, that this could be misread in Buenos Aires. It would leave only a small garrison of Royal Marines to deter Argentina from attempting to retake the Falkland Islands by force. The British government was weakening its position at a time when the Islanders and the Argentines were hardening theirs.

New talks in February 1982 produced some agreement on negotiating procedures. However, in Buenos Aires, patience with Britain had run out. The 150th anniversary of the British seizure of the islands, which was to occur in January 1983, appeared as a sort of deadline. The government of General Leopoldo Galtieri, which had come to power in December 1981, had the issue high on its agenda. Planning for a possible invasion had begun in January 1982. The Argentine government noted precedents (such as the Indian takeover of the Portuguese colony of Goa in 1961) where, after initial condemnation, the international community had accepted the results of decisive military action. In Washington, the Galtieri regime was judged to represent the acceptable face of military dictatorship. Cooperation was developing on the support of other right-wing regimes in Central America. The hope was that Washington would not be too cross if Las Malvinas were retrieved.

The timing of the Argentine invasion indicated a lack of concern for minimizing Britain's ability to respond, and indeed Argentine leaders have since confirmed that they assumed Britain would not respond. An invasion was not scheduled for the start of April. The fact that it took place then was the product of the events of March 1982.

The crisis was triggered by the landing of some Argentine scrap-metal merchants led by Sr. Davidoff on the dependency of South Georgia on March 19. Sr. Davidoff had a contract to take materials from Leith but no means for doing so. The Argentine Navy was happy to help him do this, since it would enable Argentina to establish a presence which might continue if the British Antarctic Survey left in October 1982.⁴ There was no need for this presence to be established surreptitiously. The arrangement had been agreed with the

⁴In 1981, it had been assumed that this would be the case, but the base in South Georgia was repleved. Argentina may not have been aware of this.

British Embassy in Buenos Aires. However, the naval ship taking the scrap-metal men to the Islands failed to follow the normal formalities—in particular, it did not pay a courtesy call on the British Antarctic Survey base at Grytviken.

If tension had not been developing in Anglo-Argentine relations at this point, the incident might have passed with a mild official protest by Britain. Such was the instinct of the British Embassy in Buenos Aires. However, others were more suspicious. In 1977, Argentina had established a presence in an even more remote dependency, South Thule, and there was concern that it planned to do likewise on South Georgia.⁵

A similar incident had occurred the previous December, and events now seemed to be following a pattern. The critical decision of the British government was to go one step further than simply requiring the Argentines to honor the formalities, and demand that they leave.

The instinctive desire of the Foreign Office to sort the matter out through private diplomacy was undermined by a leak to the British press of the news of the “landing” and the accompanying raising of the Argentine flag. This led to demands in Parliament for a reassuring statement. On March 21, the Foreign Office was still attempting to play the issue down; two days later, it was obliged to take a firmer line. In part, this was because the issue had now been ventilated in Parliament and the media, and it was difficult to appear to be backing down. The main trouble was that the scrap-metal merchants had been expected to leave with the ship that brought them, but it was then discovered that they had stayed behind. As they could no longer leave under their own steam, if they were to go, they would have to be removed by the HMS *Endurance*. The British government refused to acquiesce in any “infringement of British sovereignty,” but there was little it could do to back its position by force, except dispatch the HMS *Endurance* to South Georgia. The Prime Minister observed to the Commons on April 3,

Had I come to the House at that time and said that we had a problem on South Georgia with 10 people who had landed with a contract to remove a whaling station, and I had gone on to say that we should send HMS “Invincible”, I should have been accused of war mongering and sabre rattling.⁶

⁵Roger Perkins, *Operation Paraquet: The Battle for South Georgia*, Picton Publishing, 1986.

⁶House of Commons, *The Falklands Campaign: A Digest of Debates in the House of Commons 2 April to 15 June 1982*, London: HMSO, 1982.

The government did not become convinced that sovereign British territory was about to be seized by a foreign power until just two days before it happened, leaving time only for frantic but futile diplomatic activity. Up to this point, there had been some cassettes in the intelligence community, but there was general disbelief that the Argentines would take such a drastic step. There was a greater readiness to believe in a campaign of graduated pressure. The critique made by the Franks Committee, which was set up to examine why Britain had been surprised by Argentina, is of interest here. The Foreign Office, it suggested, had underestimated the importance attached by Argentina to solving the dispute in 1982, had been unduly influenced by a previous history of bellicose noises from Argentina not being followed up by serious action, and had believed

on the basis of evidence, that Argentina would follow an orderly progression in escalating the dispute, starting with economic and diplomatic measures.⁷

Had Argentina adopted such an approach, it might actually have been in a better position: Britain would have been put on the spot without being provoked into a major military response. (The Argentines did not do so because they feared that this would encourage British cooperation with Argentina's main local rival, Chile).

The Franks Report suggested that the presumption of gradualism did not make

sufficient allowance for the possibility of Argentina's military government, subject to internal political and economic pressures, acting unpredictably if at any time they became frustrated at the course of negotiations.

This suggests that the aggravating factor that turned Argentina's frustration over British intransigence into such drastic action was the domestic state of the country. However, the greater aggravating factor was Britain's attempt to convey an impression of firmness that was not backed up by any action.

In attempting on March 23 to reassure Parliament and the Falkland Islanders, the Foreign Office Minister of State, Richard Luce, alarmed the Argentines. The dispatch of the HMS *Endurance* to South Georgia, apparently to expel the scrap-metal merchants, brought national honor into play. Argentine warships were sent to warn that such an expulsion could escalate. Hints that a nuclear submarine and even frigates were being sent by Britain to the

⁷*Falkland Islands Review: Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors*, Chairman, The Rt. Hon. Lord Franks, Cmnd. 8787, London: HMSO, 1983, para. 296.

South Atlantic led to concerns that the incident on South Georgia was being used as a pretext by London to reinforce its military position in the area. If this were true, it would complicate and perhaps rule out any future plans, which were still being drawn up, to take the Islands by force. On March 26, the junta decided to strike while the opportunity was still available.⁸ In terms of strategic studies, this is almost a textbook example of preemption. One of the many disturbing features of this decision was that the intelligence upon which it was based appears to have been derived largely from compilations of press comment from Britain, much of it highly speculative. As always, the hardest thing to anticipate is heroic misunderstanding by the adversary.

At a time when Foreign Office Ministers were deciding *not* to send some ships which had been exercising off Gibraltar to the South Atlantic because this would be too provocative, the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Affairs was convinced that these ships *must be* on their way because of press reports that they *could be* on their way. Statements by ministers to Parliament which were designed to sound tough without actually saying anything may have sounded more impressive in Buenos Aires than in London.

The Argentine action thus represented a deliberate act of escalation, but one taken in the belief that the British government had already taken its own steps toward escalation. The models of deliberate escalation often assume that one side is continually taking the initiative—upping the ante in order to extract political concessions from the other side. The junta in Buenos Aires believed that if it did not act, its bargaining position would worsen as a result of the reinforcement of the British presence in the South Atlantic. This case suggests that the dynamics of escalation are likely to be fueled by essentially defensive rather than offensive instincts, and that the hardest thing to appreciate during the course of a crisis is a comprehensive misunderstanding of one's motives and behavior by the adversary.

THE SINKING OF THE BELGRANO

In seeking to regain the Falklands, Britain's major military problem was time. According to Lord Lewin, who was Chief of the Defence Staff at the time, this was because of the sustainability of the task force and the onset of the Antarctic winter:

The best effort that could be given to Ministers was that the Task Force could sustain operations for a maximum of six months from the time of sailing, and for the last two or three months of that time it would be likely to become increasingly less effective.

⁸Virginia Gamba, *The Falklands/Malvinas War: A Model for North-South Crisis Prevention*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1987.

The logistic problem was compounded by the meteorological situation. In July, three months after the ships had sailed, it would be midwinter and land and sea operations would become increasingly hazardous. It would be difficult to keep troops at sea without having them become demoralized and unfit.⁹ The task force could not stay in the South Atlantic indefinitely.

The military instinct was therefore to concentrate from the start on preparing for a landing on the Islands. The need for special forces to be inserted on the Islands to build up a picture of the Argentine land forces meant that it was necessary to get close to the Islands regularly. The main concern was to ensure that the Argentine Air Force and Navy would be engaged prior to a landing, to cause the maximum attrition and therefore reduce the opposition to the eventual landing.

The first stage of the military operation came on May 1, when with considerable effort, a Vulcan bomber attacked Stanley airport early in the morning. On the same day, a number of Harrier raids and naval bombardments were made against Argentine positions on the Islands. This was designed to give the impression of an attempted landing, to draw out the Argentine Navy and Air Force.¹⁰ In particular, the British hoped to attack the Argentine carrier *The 25 de Mayo*. The war cabinet had given permission for a submarine to attack the carrier should it cross its patrol area as it got itself in position to launch air strikes against the task force. However, the submarine failed to find the carrier, and the carrier failed to launch its aircraft.

At the end of the day, the Argentine commanders concluded that no British landings were taking place and that prudence required a return to safer waters. The British commanders did not know this. They were worried by their failure to find the carrier, which they assumed was closing on them. The only major Argentine ship that they had found was the old cruiser *Belgrano*, escorted by two destroyers and trailed by the British submarine *HMS Conqueror*. The task force commanders wanted to attack the *Belgrano* but had to wait for a political decision. By the time the decision could be made the next day, the cruiser had turned around and was heading away from the task force.

⁹*Events of the Weekend of 1st and 2nd May 1982*, Third Report of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Session 1984-5, London: HMSO, 1985, p. 96.

¹⁰Admiral Woodward and General J. Moore, "The Falklands Experience," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, March 1983.

On the assumption that the *Belgrano* was still closing, the ministers authorized an attack on it. The HMS *Conqueror* received the order authorizing the attack as it was transmitting its report of the change of course. The cruiser was torpedoed, with the loss of 360 men—the most costly single engagement of the war. All Argentina could do was to avenge the loss of the *Belgrano*. The destroyer HMS *Sheffield* was surprised on May 4 by an air-launched Exocet missile. Twenty sailors were killed, and the ship was abandoned to sink.

The British had acted in the belief that the *Belgrano* was part of a general Argentine offensive against the task force. Such a general attack had indeed been ordered, but it had been called off. The intelligence upon which the government agreed to sink the boat was simply out of date.¹¹

During that day, some progress had been made in Peruvian-Argentine discussions of a revised and simplified version of Haig's peace plan. President Belaunde of Peru assumed that Haig was doing the same with British Foreign Secretary Francis Pym, who was in Washington at the time, and it was assumed in Peru (and therefore in Argentina) that when Haig spoke, he was virtually speaking for Britain. In fact, Haig made slight progress with Pym, who was expecting the next diplomatic effort to be led by UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar. Haig confused both sides. On the evening of May 2, President Galtieri was to put the Peruvian plan, which had yet to be discussed seriously with the British, to the rest of the junta. News of the sinking of the cruiser arrived, leading to the rejection of the Peruvian proposals.

At the time, the main diplomatic cost was seen not in the loss of the Peruvian initiative—which was actually sustained until May 7—but in the loss of international political support for Britain's case. The *Belgrano* had been just outside the 200-mile exclusion zone. Although Britain had been very careful not to suggest that this was a combat-inclusive zone, it had been widely understood as such. Such a dramatic transformation of the crisis led to accusations of unwarranted escalation. Secretary of State Haig made known to Britain his concern that action such as this was alienating Latin America and threatening the Western position on the continent.¹² Many in the international community became distinctly uneasy about continuing with unequivocal support for Britain and more determined than ever to negotiate a ceasefire.

¹¹Peter Greig, "Revelations," *Granta*, No.15, Spring 1985.

¹²Sir Nicholas Henderson, "America and the Falklands," *The Economist*, November 12, 1983.

Britain's position did not crumble, largely because for much of the first half of May, it did seem to be taking attempts to reach a negotiated solution seriously. After the shock of the *Belgrano* and the *Sheffield*, the government adopted a more conciliatory attitude than it had been prepared to adopt before or was prepared to adopt later. On May 6, it accepted a version of the Peruvian proposals which reaffirmed the importance of the wishes of the Islanders but did accept an interim administration made up of a small group of countries excluding Britain to supervise the withdrawal of Argentine forces and be involved in negotiations for a "definitive agreement on the status of the islands." This was the most that the British government was ever prepared to offer, but by this time Argentina was no longer interested.

JUST ESCALATION

The sinking of the *Belgrano* became a *cause celebre* in Britain after the war. It became so because Secretary of Defence John Nott's original report of the action suggested that the Argentine cruiser had been sunk because it was closing in on the task force; it soon became clear that this was not the case, and that at the time of the sinking the *Belgrano* had been turning for home. The critics have put a lot of energy into demonstrating that the government *must* have known of a promising possibility for a peace settlement, just as they *must* have known that the *Belgrano* was not a threat because of the direction in which it was sailing at the time it was sunk.¹³

The importance of this postwar debate is that it throws into relief common assumptions concerning the control of escalation which are often adopted by politicians. A military logic is expected to be subservient to a political logic. This points to a graduated response, with each military escalation justified only if political remedies continue to be frustrated. All military action, at least in a conflict's early stages, while there remains hope of a political settlement, is expected to support diplomatic purposes.

At work is what might be described as *just escalation*, that is, an attempt to prescribe military conduct when hostilities are under way and the original wrong has yet to be righted. It has a resonance in traditional concepts of just war, contemporary strategic theory, and public debate, as exemplified in the concept of flexible response.

¹³Desmond Rice and Arthur Gavshon, *The Sinking of the Belgrano*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1984.

The theory of just escalation insists that any step change in the degree of armed force employed must be geared to the developing political situation and must be no more than is necessary to induce that change in the opponent's stance necessary to make possible an honorable settlement. *Unjust escalation*, by contrast, involves excessive force and tends to be counterproductive—assuming that this is another theory in which the ethical and the prudent are happily intertwined. Unjust escalation reduces the chance of settlement and leads to a vicious and costly fight to the finish. Both are theories of controlled escalation.

These ideas find an echo in contemporary strategic theory, where it is often suggested that the ideal is for all military operations to be under firm political control, since the only purposes for which they can be used legitimately are political. In particular, any move beyond the existing limits to a conflict—the process known as escalation—should be taken at the highest political level and only after the most careful consideration of the likely military and political consequences. In limited wars, it is assumed that control will be exercised, in order to reinforce a negotiating position.

The sinking of the *Belgrano* has come to be presented as a classic case of unjust escalation. The most extreme set of allegations suggests that the government knowingly acted in such a way as to preclude a diplomatic solution in preference to a military solution. In the more modest version, the war cabinet pursued a military option recklessly, thereby losing, and even wrecking—perhaps inadvertently—a chance for peace. In both versions, the moral is reinforced by the sinking of the HMS *Sheffield* on May 4, which is later seen as a form of retribution. Yet the complex interactions between the armed forces of the two sides and the relationship of military to diplomatic activity make apparent the difficulty of relating military force to diplomacy in a controlled manner. This relationship is far more complex even in a limited war than much strategic theory might lead us to suppose.

There was no formal state of war between Britain and Argentina. Such a state would have carried with it many awkward implications for Britain, Argentina, and other important nations. For example, the United States would have been required to declare its neutrality. The lack of a declaration of war meant that Britain was obliged to justify Operation Paraquet in terms of the “inherent right of self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter.” This justification was reinforced by Security Council Resolution 502 of April 3, 1982, which required Argentina to remove its forces from the Falklands.¹⁴

¹⁴Article 51 states: “Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to maintain international peace and security.” In Resolution 502, the Security Council expressed itself to

Does acting in self-defense impose any limitations on the sort of military action permitted? At what point might such action exceed the requirements of self-defense? The difficulty is that the exercise of the inherent right of self-defense *after* the seizure of territory by another country is likely to require the use of sufficient force to eject the enemy from that territory. If one is forced to stay on the tactical defensive, because of some concept of proportionality, then all the advantages flow to the aggressor, whose offensive action has been completed. Thus, what is left uncertain by the idea of taking measures in self-defense is the circumstances in which it is permissible to go onto the offensive.

There is therefore no reason in principle why self-defense cannot involve going onto the offensive. The commander of the task force was charged with bringing about the withdrawal of the Argentine forces from the Falkland Islands and reestablishing British administration there, with the minimum loss of life. The problem demonstrated by the *Belgrano* episode is that once military operations have begun in earnest, the question of what constitutes minimum force becomes moot, and the casualties likely to result from any given operation become almost impossible to calculate.

Political constraints were put on military operations in the Falklands War. Direct attacks on the Argentine mainland were advocated but ruled out because of the possible impact on international opinion (and also because of doubts about their effectiveness). There was a continuing restriction on the conduct of any operations against Argentine territory or within Argentine territorial waters. The military at different times argued that these restrictions did impose penalties—they gave warships safe haven and aircraft safe bases. Nevertheless, because the British did not make these restrictions explicit, Argentine commanders could not rely upon them. The uncertainty complicated Argentine military planning. Equally, Argentina decided not to attempt to attack passenger liners serving as troopships, but the thought that it might was a source of great anxiety to the British commanders. Thus, while both sides may accept the fact that certain categories of military action would incur severe political penalties, they can gain at least some of the military advantages by not making this explicit. Therefore, the actual limits on warfare are always to a degree ambiguous.

be disturbed by reports of an invasion by the Armed Forces of Argentina and determined that there had been a "breach of the peace in the region" before demanding (1) "an immediate cessation of hostilities" and (2) "an immediate withdrawal of all Argentine forces from the Falkland Islands (Islas Malvinas)." It concluded with a call to both sides to seek a diplomatic settlement. Because Argentine forces did not withdraw, Britain felt able to exercise its "inherent right of self-defence."

The same situation applies to nuclear submarines. This was Britain's major military advantage, but one that was difficult to use against merchantmen without breaking agreed rules of naval engagements. The position against warships was more ambiguous. The politicians were gradually persuaded to overcome their inhibitions against using the nuclear submarines, first within the Exclusion Zone, then against the carrier, and eventually against any warship outside territorial waters. This persuasion became more effective as it was felt that the limitations on the conflict were generally being eroded. But this meant that there was no clear sense of the "rules of the game" and that steps that went beyond what might have been understood as a threshold, taken for whatever reason, inevitably raised the political temperature. Although Britain had made statements to the effect that the Exclusion Zone by no means precluded combat outside, it was not surprising that enemy ships presumed that they would be safer outside it than in.

Thus, while the military were not allowed simply to defeat the enemy armed forces through whatever appeared to be the most expeditious and effective means, the limits within which force was being applied were not necessarily evident to the other side. To gain the operational advantages that come with keeping the adversary guessing, Britain's apparent rules of engagement, of which Argentina was notified through the United Nations, were less severe than those actually in use.

Moreover, even when the intent is to give the impression that only measured force is being applied, in practice it is not always so easy to control the use of armed force. This is especially so when the adversary is a competent and well-equipped entity with whom it might be too dangerous to take risks. While it might be advisable to appear moderate, to gain public support at home and abroad, it is also necessary to convince the adversary of resolve. An effective display of force might extract sufficient concessions in negotiations to make further and more violent action unnecessary. Because of these considerations, the military found itself under pressure to be mindful of the immediate diplomatic impact of its operations as well as the ultimate objective of retaking the Islands.

This reflected the view that because such wars are settled diplomatically, military action must be geared to achieving a favorable eventual settlement. Action of this sort may be described in terms of "force being the only language they understand," the need to "turn the screw, teach a lesson, concentrate their minds," and so on.

With each turn of the screw, it is necessary to inquire whether the victim is becoming more responsive before turning again. But the British position in the South Atlantic did not allow for the gradualism that this implies. Time was running out. The need to prepare for

an amphibious landing imposed its own strict timetable. The fear was that diplomacy would be used to reinforce the Argentine military position by disrupting this schedule. Argentina, for its part, was trying to hold on to a position, and therefore it had a much clearer interest in a ceasefire. In March, however, it was Argentina that eschewed gradualism on the grounds that if it waited too long, the British would have reinforced their naval presence in the South Atlantic to preclude any military operation to take the Islands in the future.

To some extent, gradualism is a luxury that only those confident of their superiority (such as a superpower facing a minor power on the superpower's terms) and able to be patient can afford. For those fearful of defeat, all restrictions imposed for political reasons—whether they involve the risk of offending international opinion or the need to allow diplomacy to take its course—impose operational penalties.

The unavoidable tension between political and military logic in the conduct of any limited war warns against any attempt to relate diplomatic action too closely with military action, simply because of the speed with which operational circumstances can change. If tactical decisions become too infused with political meaning, there is a risk that the outcomes of particular engagements, which can never be exactly foreseen, will be wrongly interpreted.

Gradualism itself is unlikely to be sustained. Military campaigns rarely involve a buildup to a grand finale; the bloodiest and most difficult confrontations can be among the earliest, being followed by moderate action, with the intensity picking up again when the combatants have recovered their breath. The rhythm and tempo of conflict are influenced by much more than the rhythm and tempo of diplomacy.

In limited war, individual engagements can take on a great significance, yet all that is known about warfare tells us the nature and outcome of these engagements will be influenced by chance and uncertainty as much as careful staff work and skill in combat. In limited war, it is necessary to operate with imperfect intelligence and poor communications. Moreover, when this familiar "fog of war" descends over a battlefield, it can soon obscure any associated diplomacy. In addition, as the "Chinese whispers" from Haig through Belaunde to Galtieri testify, diplomatic activity itself can mislead and confuse.

V. CONCLUSION

Control of the transition from crisis to war depends on military action being adjusted throughout to the requirements of diplomacy. From this case study, it can be seen that unless the practicalities of military power are understood, such power will not prove to be an adequate tool of diplomacy but will create diplomatic imperatives of its own. The military logic will drive a political logic. Once invoked, military power transforms diplomacy, as compulsion takes over from compromise. Previously acceptable solutions become an insult to the men who died.

As stated in the introduction to this Note, the extent to which this is true in an affair as limited as the Falklands War warns of just how much more true it would be in the event of a major conflict involving the superpowers. There is, of course, nothing new in the identification of the "fog of war" or its half-brother, the "fog of diplomacy," as familiar characters in international dramas. Yet the unpredictable and uncertain is often played down in peacetime planning, where it is often supposed that a course of action can be laid down for every eventuality.

Once a major crisis breaks, the fog soon descends and the old lessons are relearned, but the learning process can take time and awful things might happen during that time. With the limited experience of most political leaders in high-level crisis management, the learning process may now take longer than in previous eras, when a steady amount of great-power conflict was the norm. It is at the very least important that any crisis simulations designed to familiarize policymakers with the procedures, stresses, and strains of this sort of activity include a good measure of the unexpected, the incompetent, and the misunderstood and do not overencourage the notion of an orderly and systematic process.

Are there aspects of superpower conflicts that might help dispel the fog? By and large, the superpowers should have much better sources of intelligence and means of communication. But their government machines and their armed forces are much more complex, and command and control can suffer accordingly. For the United States, an important aspect of British decisionmaking during the war was that those responsible knew each other well, worked physically close together (the relevant ministries are within walking distance), and on the civilian side were professional civil servants with long experience rather than political appointees. Moreover, no attempt was made to ensure that every service branch or agency of government had a fair share of the action according to some notional

bureaucratic formula. One service, the Royal Navy, was given the operational lead, and this simplified command and control. A final point is the need to recognize that even small-scale military encounters (and a superpower crisis can start with such encounters) can have decisive political consequences. One of the gaps in British command and control arrangements was a level of command between the tactical field commanders, with their responsibility for specific tasks, and the headquarters at home, which set the tasks according to available information and government decisions. The lack of this level meant that there was often a lack of clear overview of the military situation from close at hand, and of a buffer between the field commanders and the political pressures emanating from London. It might be added in this regard that educational efforts are also required in the area of logistics, which is often imperfectly understood in military commands and when not preorganized to allow military exercises to run smoothly unavoidably slows everything down, much to the exasperation of politicians anxious for results.

Restraint in the use of force is much more feasible for countries with significant local military superiority or at least substantial reserves and a range of options that can be sustained over time. Countries with limited military power lack the diplomatic flexibility of a superpower. However, superpowers should also keep these points in mind, for they too might find it difficult to sustain military operations some distance from home. Military options cannot be maintained indefinitely, and some are highly perishable; if they deteriorate, so does a bargaining position. This again often depends on the quality of logistical arrangements.

A final point of relevance to superpowers is that they can have an added requirement to demonstrate the irrelevance of nuclear capabilities, especially in conflicts where defeat cannot be precluded. There is an interesting contrast between the extraordinary sensitivity to the possibility of any nuclear involvement and the minimal risk that a catastrophe might occur through an escalatory process, and the high expectations of control when it comes to controlling the escalatory process to support diplomatic efforts.

What do we expect of political leaders and their military and diplomatic advisers in these circumstances? They must ensure that they are privy to the innermost thoughts of the enemy, and clairvoyant about decisions that it has yet to make; that they can follow, decode, and correctly interpret enemy military orders, however complex the sequences and cryptic the message; that they can make sense of complex and fast-moving events, in a variety of capital cities as well as theaters of war; that they can identify the full operational and diplomatic implications of these events and appraise the available choices and the possible consequences of each; and that they can make firm decisions and communicate them swiftly

and unambiguously to those responsible for their implementation, who will then produce exactly the results intended.

All this would require as much good luck as good management. Events generally move faster than the capacity of decisionmakers to absorb them and assess their meaning. Information is inevitably imperfect, incomplete, and often contradictory. The assumptions with which decisionmakers fill the gaps may be hopelessly wrong, yet perfectly reasonable. Political control over military operations is necessary but extraordinarily difficult. Military force is not a light and sensitive instrument. It is heavy and unwieldy and can produce unexpected results.